San
Joaquin
River
Management
Program

P.O. Box 942836, Sacramento, CA 94236-0001

April 26, 2001

Mr. Patrick Koepele
Tuolumne River Preservation Trust
914 Thirteenth Street
Modesto, California 95354

Dear Mr. Koepele:

I am writing in support of the efforts of the Tuolumne River Preservation Trust, the East Stanislaus Resource Conservation Service, and U.S. Department of Agricultural Natural Resources Conservation Service to protect and restore riparian lands on the Tuolumne River.

The San Joaquin River Management Program provides a forum to identify problems and solutions to issues related to wildlife, flood protection, water quality, water supply, fisheries, and recreation. The SJRMP Action Team and Advisory Council have reviewed and discussed the "Floodplain Acquisition and Restoration: Todd and Venn II" project, and support this joint effort.

The Advisory Council understands that: both properties involve willing sellers; title to the Todd property will be held by the ESRCD, with a perpetual conservation easement held by NRCS; and NRCS will also hold the conservation easement on the Venn II property. Furthermore, the acquisition and development will go through an environmental review and consider all third party impacts.

The 1995 San Joaquin River Management Plan recommends the long-term protection and restoration of riparian lands (see pp. 170-1). This recommendation is based on a need to maintain sufficient quantity, quality, diversity, and continuity of riparian habitat and reverse the decline of riparian-dependent wildlife species in the San Joaquin Valley.

If you have any questions in this regard, please contact Paula Landis, Action Team Chair, at (559) 230-3310.

Sincerely,

T. R.

Tim Ramirez, Advisory Council Chair
San Joaquin River Management Program

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION IS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES

PROPOSAL FOR
FLOODPLAIN ACQUISITION AND RESTORATION
Todd and Venn II Properties
Lower Tuolumne River

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Tuolumne River Preservation Trust seeks funds from the Department of Water Resources - Flood Corridor Protection Program to acquire fee title and perpetual conservation easements and restore approximately 175 acres of Tuolumne River floodplain. The estimated cost for acquisition and restoration is $1,240,000. Project planning for acquisition is in-progress. Fee title and/or easement acquisition will occur once funds are obtained. Restoration will follow acquisition.

This proposal is for two separate properties that complement adjacent properties that have conservation easements on them. If easements or fee title are acquired on both properties, there will be four contiguous properties, totaling 371 acres in size that are protected for conservation purposes. Additionally, these properties would form a riparian corridor of approximately two miles in length on the south side of the river, and approximately one mile in length on the north side of the river.

Both properties are key to the restoration of this reach of the river. Acquiring and restoring these parcels within the Tuolumne River floodway will allow channel migration, provide for reestablishment of a large riparian forest, and improve rearing and migratory habitat for fall run chinook salmon and other native fish species.

The Tuolumne River Preservation Trust has built a partnership for these projects. On one parcel, the East Stanislaus Resource Conservation District (ESRCD) would acquire the fee title, with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) simultaneously acquiring a perpetual conservation easement through its Floodplain Easement Program.

On the second parcel, the NRCS will acquire and hold a perpetual conservation easement on the property, also through its Floodplain Easement Program. This program is capable of acquiring easements on flood-prone farmlands, but there is a $2,000/acre maximum NRCS is allowed to put towards the purchase of these easements. Partner funds are likely to be needed. Once these parcels are acquired, the three partners plan to undertake riparian habitat restoration projects.

Description of the Parcels

Todd Property

The Todd Property is a 50-acre parcel on the north side of the Tuolumne River about 6 miles upstream from the confluence with the San Joaquin River. The property contains about 15 acres of undisturbed land adjacent to the river; the remaining 35 acres is currently leased and is growing corn and oats. The lease is a 6-year lease and expires in June of 2002. Due to its location and elevation, the land is frequently saturated. Parts of this parcel flooded during the January 1997 flood. These characteristics make the land difficult to farm profitably.

The parcel is situated on a peninsula formed by a sharp meander bend in the river. The NRCS has or will soon have conservation easements across the river from the property on two of its sides. One of these properties, Grayson River Ranch, a 140-acre perpetual conservation easement held by the NRCS, is undergoing a major restoration effort. A restoration project is planned for the other property (Venn I), a 56-acre parcel. Additionally, NRCS owns a large conservation easement on the Bancroft property downstream of these parcels. That easement is approximately 300 acres, although no restoration plan is developed at this time.

Venn II Property

Venn II is a 125-acre parcel on the south side of the Tuolumne River about 6 miles upstream from the confluence with the San Joaquin River. The property consists of low floodplain, 115 acres of which has been farmed. Presently on the land are approximately 12-13 acres of almond trees, and approximately 2 acres of Asian pears. The remaining portion is fallow. The owner reports the river channel historically occupied this parcel as late as the early 1950's.

Venn II is contiguous with Venn I, a parcel under the same ownership on which the NRCS previously acquired a conservation easement. Also, Grayson River Ranch is located less than 1/4-mile downstream from both parcels.

Significance of the Parcels

These parcels are key to the restoration of this reach of the river for several reasons.

Acquiring these parcels would:

- **Expand the Tuolumne River floodway.** While Don Pedro dam is presently operated for a maximum allowable release of 9,000 cubic feet per second (cfs), many stakeholders are interested in increasing the maximum allowable release to at least 20,000 cfs (below Dry Creek in Modesto) as an important flood management measure. The January 1997 floods (about 60,000 cfs) highlighted the need for increasing the allowable release on the Tuolumne River. Acquisition/easement of the Todd and Venn properties would be within part of the floodway accommodating the proposed higher flows.

- **Allow channel meandering.** Existing low agricultural berms would no longer be maintained giving the river better access to its historic floodplain at high flows. Reconnecting the river with its floodplain and riparian restoration projects can reverse decline in important natural habitats sustained over the past few decades. During this time, bank riprap and low flood flow regimes have led to more stabilized banks in what was once a frequently migrating channel. Stabilization has encouraged trapezoidal channel geometry, prevented migration in most reaches, reduced natural riparian regeneration, and eliminated meander cutoffs (and associated oxbows). Berms and riprap would no longer be used on these parcels to prevent flooding and/or channel migration.
- **Provide for re-establishment of a larger riparian forest.** From the confluence with the San Joaquin to River Mile (RM) 10.4 there are few large stands of riparian vegetation, with only a small percentage of valley oak. Acquisition of these properties would allow for the reestablishment of a large riparian forest including the restoration of some valley oak woodland, an important forest in this reach of the river. A reestablished forest would also improve water quality during high-flow events by slowing water velocities and trapping sediment and the forest will provide a buffer between the surrounding agricultural land and the river.
- **Improve rearing and migratory habitat for fall-run chinook salmon and steelhead as well as migratory birds.** This project would include approximately 20-30 acres of permanent wetland habitat, 200-220 acres of seasonal wetland/floodplain habitat and approximately 2 miles of shaded riverine aquatic habitat in an area that was previously intensely cultivated. It will provide cover, safety, and rearing habitat for fish as well as decreased stream velocities, decreased channelization, and lower thermal input to the water. Reestablishment of the riparian community will improve the vegetative input to the stream and thus improve the availability of nutrients to the food chain, which will benefit all trophic levels from microorganisms up through birds. These processes will improve rearing habitat for San Joaquin fall-run chinook salmon and other native fish species in the river and for bird species in the riparian vegetation.

REASON FOR THE PROJECT

There are several important reasons for this acquisition; frequent flooding, population pressures are making preservation of open space a statewide concern, and loss of wetlands has made remaining wetlands key to Central Valley ecology.

- **Flooding**

  This land has been subject to flooding and saturation, making it difficult to farm profitably. The most notable recent flooding event (~60,000 cfs) occurred during the January 1997 floods. One important recommendation of the Tuolumne River Technical Advisory Committee and others to reduce future flooding on the Tuolumne and improve the fish and wildlife habitat is to increase the maximum allowable release of water from 9,000 cfs below Dry Creek at Modesto to at least 20,000 cfs. This increase in releases is the subject of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Tuolumne River Feasibility Study for flood damage reduction and habitat restoration. This project will contribute towards that

increase in the floodway (i.e. increase in lands dedicated to floodplain uses, such as riparian forest).

- **Population Pressures and Need for Open Space Protection**
  California's Department of Finance predicts the state's population will grow to 58 million people by the year 2040—an increase of more than 25 million people in the next 40 years. Additionally, the Department of Finance projects the Stanislaus County's population will grow from 477,300 in July of this year to 793,600 by 2020.

  Inefficient development practices are common. Over the last five years, an average of 138,000 acres per year of California open-space has been lost to urban development, an increase of more than 50% from the previous decade.

  According to the California Department of Conservation 1,145 acres of open -space and farmland were converted to urban use from 1996-98 in Stanislaus County. Completion of this project will contribute positively towards increasing and protecting open-space.

- **Loss of Central Valley Riparian Habitat**
  The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has estimated that as much as ninety to ninety-eight percent of the historical riparian and wetland habitat in the Central Valley has been lost since the early-1800s . This has led to a decline in plant and animal population numbers and species diversity. Riparian forest and woodland communities are increasingly important as breeding and rearing habitat for a variety of terrestrial and aquatic species, and as resting and foraging habitat for migratory waterfowl and songbirds. Riparian corridors provide essential migratory conduits for species dependent upon riparian and foothill environments to breed and forage. Also, riparian habitat in this area of the San Joaquin Valley plays an essential role in the health and productivity of the Pacific Flyway, one of the most important flyways in North America. This flyway is vital for both resident and migratory waterfowl and for neotropical birds.

  Additionally, riparian habitat plays an increasingly vital role in forming a buffer between agricultural lands and adjacent river systems. This habitat acts as a filter, cleaning agricultural runoff before it reaches the river.

MONITORING

A monitoring program is included in the budget to measure the success of the project in restoring riparian and wetland habitat. This monitoring program will assess the abundance of wildlife, fish, and vegetation both before and after the acquisition and restoration of the property. We expect that species richness and diversity of native riparian-associated birds and mammals increases after riparian areas are restored. Habitat in backwater channels and inundated floodplain surfaces will be compared to

main river channel sites to document fish use. Finally, aerial photographs will provide information on project inundation regimes and restoration of vegetative cover.

PREVIOUS FUNDING

This is a new project. No funding has previously been sought for this project as it is described in this proposal.

LOCAL SUPPORT

Agencies and Organizations in Support of the Project: The project has been supported by the Tuolumne River Technical Advisory Committee (TRTAC). TRTAC participants include: Modesto Irrigation District; Turlock Irrigation District; City and County of San Francisco; California Department of Fish and Game; and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; San Francisco Bay Area Water User's Association; Friends of the Tuolumne, Inc.; Tuolumne River Preservation Trust; Tuolumne River Expeditions; California Sports Fishing Protection Alliance.

It has also been supported by the Tuolumne River Initiative, consisting of: California Department of Fish and Game; California Striped Bass Association; City of Ceres; Ceres Chamber of Commerce; East Stanislaus Resource Conservation District; Friends of the Tuolumne, Inc.; City of Modesto; Modesto Chamber of Commerce; Modesto Irrigation District; Sierra Club, Yokuts Group; Stanislaus Audubon Society; Stanislaus County; Stanislaus Flyfishermen; The Nature Conservancy; The Trust for Public Land; Tuolumne River Alliance; Tuolumne River Preservation Trust; Tuolumne River Regional Park; Tuolumne River Technical Advisory Committee; Turlock Irrigation District; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; U.S.D.A. - Natural Resources Conservation Service; City of Waterford; Waterford Chamber of Commerce.

PROJECT LEAD/CONTACT INFORMATION:

The project is a partnership among the Tuolumne River Preservation Trust, the East Stanislaus Resource Conservation District and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. TRPT: Patrick Koepele, 914 13th Street, Modesto CA 94123, 209/236-0330, fax –0311, **patrick@tuolumne.org**